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The jazz in our pocket

- 06, 2025 - Les lieux du jazz en Europe au XXI siècle / Places for jazz in 21st-century Europe -



Date de mise en ligne : mardi 11 novembre 2025

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The unpredictable road jazz took from the ‘His Master’s Voice’ records to the pockets of our jeans.

The online world

In the online world we live in, we can listen to jazz any time, any place, and as long as we want. Jazz does not have a ‘home’, so it looks like. Is this really the case ? Has jazz become completely homeless ? Does jazz live in the cloud, accessible only through the shiny devices we carry in our clothes all day ? With all the flexibility that has come with listening to jazz – “how much, how long, and where we want” – has come a sense of discomfort, of being disconnected from what is really happening in jazz ?

Listening to jazz this way, streamed to us via the cloud, is not the real thing.

No wonder the return of vinyl has been such a major success. No need to wear headphones or press or tap on a little shiny box. Listening to vinyl means taking a massive disk out of a beautiful carton sleeve, with artistic pictures on the front side and a lot of informative text on the other side. One has to do some work to get the music to sound. The vinyl record has to be placed on the nostalgic-looking record player, an arm has to be lifted and carefully placed in the first groove of the record. By making all these gestures, the listener becomes the owner of the music that is about to sound and fill the room. IKEA's success is built on the same principles. By unpacking and assembling a new piece of furniture, one becomes the real owner of what is bought.

By playing vinyl records, the listener not only builds up a closer relation with jazz, but the room filled with music becomes a jazz club. The allusion to a jazz club arises - a small or medium sized space that is cozy, comfortable and nice sounding. You can dim the lights, pour something to drink, sit in your comfortable chair, and read the sleeve once more, and listen to the music and fully enjoy jazz. Without having to go outdoors, your home has become your personal jazz club by listening to vinyl. It is difficult to find out if there is a direct correlation between the return of vinyl and the well-attended performances in jazz clubs and festivals in the last few years. However, it is safe to assume that the two trends – playing jazz on vinyl at home and attending live performances – reinforce one another.

Before the online world

Listening to jazz in Europe, before we lived in the online world, has travelled a long and bumpy road. Before the Second World War, jazz was, on one side of the spectrum, placed on a high throne by a limited number of artists from various disciplines. Composers, writers, theater makers, all incorporated ‘jazz’ in their works. About the music itself : little did they know. Live performances of jazz were relatively sparse and records were difficult to obtain. Nonetheless, even with so little information and access to only one style of jazz, these mainly highbrow artists heard all sorts of magical things in jazz - exotic roots, naturalism, purity, honesty, genius. On the other side of the spectrum, people enjoyed dancing the fox-trot, the turkey-trot and the Charleston on jazz, or what they thought was jazz and was sold to them as jazz.

The mid-century jazz floods.

Especially the young intellectuals in Paris, but also everywhere else in Europe, had a hard time figuring out how, where and when to listen to jazz after the Second World War. The only thing they more or less agreed on, was the dress code. Tight-fitting black clothes ; a style in jazz fashion that lives on, in a certain way, until today.

By the end of the 1940s, the young audience became flooded with jazz. New Orleans jazz was revived and renamed ‘Dixieland’. For some, it was the only real jazz. But what to think of Bebop, with its jagged lines, breakneck tempos and wild improvisations ? The ‘grooves’ in Hard Bop appealed to another audience. At least you could dance to that music, and if not dancing, you could snap your fingers on the 2 and the 4 of each bar. And the ‘dance hall days’ were not completely over. Swing big bands were not yet pushed away by Rock & Roll. Technology progressed and Hi-Fi

stereo made it possible to finally hear all the delicate refinements in sound and color, especially in Cool Jazz.

Moving to the second half of the 1950s and summing it up : the reborn-New Orleans Style was played by many, mostly amateur bands, Swing had not completely died out and the 'Lindy Hop' offered attractive steps to dance on. The craze of Bebop had some intriguing intellectual aspects, on Hard Bop you could move a little, and the attractive beauty of Cool Jazz was mesmerizing. The audience in Europe between 1945 and 1955 was bombarded with a multitude of jazz styles and ways and places to listen to jazz. The next thing that happened : Free Jazz and Rock Jazz came to the table, bringing more options, more confusion, more niches.

After 'historic' jazz

By the end of the 1970s, it looked like jazz was 'over'. In jazz history books, the period until the end of that decade is often referred to as 'historic jazz' and sometimes even 'classic jazz'. 'Jazz is not dead ; it just smells funny' was the much-quoted joke of Frank Zappa. The question 'what is jazz ?' was and is of all times, but at the end of the 1970s, it was extremely frequently asked by numerous people.

Jazz was developed from relatively, deceptively simple music to extremely complex music. Jazz had been dancing music, concert music and art music. These three functions of jazz now coexisted. Jazz was developed from tonal to modal to a-tonal music. All musical systems were still in use, but they seemed exhausted. There was no more 'avant-garde', nothing to break away from. By the end of the 1970s, a certain 'fatigue' had fallen over jazz.

When jazz appeared to be at its most 'dead' moment at the end of the 1970s, three parallel major impulses came up in the 1980s to revive the musical genre, rebuild the audience, and create new venues.

One : academies, conservatories and universities opened their doors for jazz. In academia, jazz always had a small place, but in the 1980s jazz departments popped up like mushrooms everywhere in Europe and the USA. Jazz musicians were now better trained and informed than ever.

Two : a new technological development : the CD. The entire old 'jazz catalog' of jazz recordings was brought out on the market, complete with alternate takes and recordings that were never brought out before. Many new jazz artists as well brought their music out on CD. The new medium was cheaper, faster and better sounding than the old vinyl. A new, large audience started to build up jazz collections on CD.

Three : new jazz festivals in Europe. As with jazz in academia, there had always been some small-scale jazz festivals. However, in the 1980s, jazz festivals, especially in the summer, exploded in size and number. Throughout the year, jazz clubs and concert venues benefited from the momentum of these festivals. Live jazz could now be heard year-round, in all kinds of venues.

Zooming in on the jazz festivals : in the 1990s and on, the programs presented the broadest range of styles possible. New Orleans Style bands paraded at the entrance, Free Jazz could be heard in the basement or on the roof of the buildings, all other styles were anywhere else.

Jazz flourished again.

After 2007

Between 1977 and 2007, the audience in Europe had a jazz menu to choose from that seemed to be endless and forever going on. In 2007, Steve Jobs pulled one more thing out of his pocket : the iPhone, a device designed to serve as your personal remote control for the world. Yes, you could still make a telephone conversation with your 'mobile phone', but with all the 'apps' available, and still growing, the device has become an inseparable element in our daily existence. Moreover, the entire world got addicted to the 'mobile'. From 2007 on, jazz rapidly lost its physical existence and disappeared in 'the cloud'. As a consequence, jazz audiences in Europe were everywhere, always there, and yet nowhere.

The picture painted here is very similar to the 'jazz is dead' theory of the late 1970s. However, jazz is a living art form. A cliché but true. Many times, the 'jazz is dead' theory has popped up. In the 1920s, during the Great Depression. The shock of Free Jazz that was brought in the 1960s. The funny smell noticed in the 1970s. The death of Miles Davis in the 1990s. The feared end of the entire world at the turn of the century in 2000. Covid-19 at the beginning of the 2020s. However, jazz always lived on.

Artificial intelligence, digitalization, the cloud, the internet : these things and developments sometimes appear, and sometimes are very scary. However, all these inventions had a counterreaction : the comeback of vinyl, the personal, home jazz club. Looking ahead, it is certain that jazz will always survive and will always come out better and refreshed after difficult times. It is clear that the musical genre called jazz, now, is livelier than ever, reaches more ears than ever, touches more people than ever.

In Europe, in the entire world.

Post-scriptum :

Wouter Turkenburg, born in Singapore in 1953, studied classical guitar at the Arnhem Conservatory and Musicology at the Amsterdam University. He graduated 'cum laude' in 1983. At the Amsterdam School of Music in 1981 he founded the World Music Department and the Jazz Department.

In 1985 he became the head of the jazz department of the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague, The Netherlands, a position he holds up to 2019.

In 1990 until 2009 he was lecturer in the history of jazz at the Utrecht University, The Netherlands. From 2003 to 2022 he also lectured at the Leiden University, The Netherlands.

In 1989 Wouter Turkenburg co-founded the IASJ, the International Association of Schools of Jazz, for which David Liebman took the initiative. The first Annual IASJ Jazz Meeting took place at his institute in 1990. In 2003 the 1st IASJ Jazz Education Conference took place there as well. He currently is the Executive Director of the IASJ.

Wouter Turkenburg with Kurt Ellenberger are the editors-in-chief of the IASJ Journal of Applied Jazz Research, launched in February 2023.